



**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES  
DEPARTMENT OF AUDITOR-CONTROLLER**

KENNETH HAHN HALL OF ADMINISTRATION  
500 WEST TEMPLE STREET, ROOM 525  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90012-2766  
PHONE: (213) 974-8301 FAX: (213) 626-5427

J. TYLER McCAULEY  
AUDITOR-CONTROLLER

March 30, 2007

TO: Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman  
Supervisor Gloria Molina  
Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke  
Supervisor Don Knabe  
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

FROM: J. Tyler McCauley   
Auditor-Controller

SUBJECT: **REVISED SEWAGE SPILL DATA**

On January 30, 2007, the Board of Supervisors instructed my office to review and correct audit data in my January 24, 2007, Report on Sewage Spills related to spills into the various watershed areas, and the reporting of sewage spills to the City of Long Beach Health Officer and the County of Los Angeles Public Health Officer. The following is a report on the approach we used to refine the sewage spill data and the revised data.

**Approach**

At our request, the Department of Public Works (DPW), the Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts (LACSD), and the Los Angeles City Bureau of Sanitation (LACBS) provided a listing of sewage spills of 1,000 gallons or greater that occurred from January 2002 through July 2006. We also requested DPW's Watershed Management Division and LACSD to verify the watershed area where spills originated. In addition, we contacted the County of Los Angeles Public Health Officer and the City of Long Beach Health Officer to determine whether they were notified of the spills. Some of the spills occurred in watershed areas that are tributary to State waters outside the County of Los Angeles. Accordingly, we contacted the public health officers for Orange and Ventura counties to verify whether dischargers notified them of spills in watershed areas that discharge in their jurisdiction.

## **Results of Review**

### **Revised Spill Data**

From January 2002 through July 2006, DPW, LACSD, and LACBS reported that there were 241 spills of 1,000 gallons or more.<sup>1</sup> The details are listed below. It should be noted that not all sewage spills reached ocean waters. In some cases, the spills were contained and returned to the sanitary sewer system. Because of a variety of technical uncertainties (e.g., spill volume, amount of spill recovered, existence and length of concrete and/or soft bottom channels, amount of percolation, distance between spill origination point and ocean, existing channel flow, etc.), we are unable to provide an estimate of how much sewage actually reached ocean waters or flowed to jurisdictions outside Los Angeles County. In addition, in some instances, the dischargers voluntarily reported spills that did not reach waters of the State.

- 94 spills, totaling 2,838,441 gallons, occurred within the Santa Monica Bay Watershed Area, which is tributary to the Santa Monica Bay.
- 92 spills, totaling 19,149,560 gallons, occurred within the Los Angeles River Watershed Area, which is tributary to the Long Beach Harbor/San Pedro Bay.
- 21 spills, totaling 317,031 gallons, occurred within the Dominguez Channel Watershed Area, which is tributary to the Los Angeles Harbor/San Pedro Bay.
- 23 spills, totaling 219,400 gallons, occurred within the San Gabriel Valley Watershed Area, which is tributary to ocean waters at the border between the City of Long Beach and Orange County.
- Three spills, totaling 33,500 gallons, occurred within the Antelope Valley Watershed Area, which is an enclosed basin and does not discharge to ocean waters.
- Five spills, totaling 1,969,600 gallons, occurred within the Santa Clara Watershed Area, which is tributary to ocean waters in Ventura County.
- Two spills, totaling 6,100 gallons, occurred within the Channel Islands Watershed Area.
- One spill, totaling 1,000 gallons, could not be traced to a specific watershed area due to insufficient information provided by the discharger.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our January 24, 2007 report identified 208 spills, which we subsequently determined contained one duplicate spill. The revised spill data includes an additional 34 spills reported by the dischargers. Some of the additional 34 spills were large volume wet weather spills into the Los Angeles River Watershed Area, including a series of spills, totaling approximately 15 million gallons, on February 19, 2005. These spills added significantly to the total reported spill volume.

### **Health Officer Notification**

From the spill data, we attempted to verify whether dischargers notified the local health officer(s) of all spills and whether the health officer maintained records of the spill notifications. We found that: 1) dischargers did not always notify the local health officer of spills affecting their jurisdiction, and 2) health officers did not always document reports of sewage spills. Specifically:

**Los Angeles County Public Health Officer** - Of the 241 spills, dischargers reported they notified the County Public Health Officer of all spills regardless of the watershed area. Of the 241 spills allegedly reported to the Public Health Officer, 205 (85%) could not be traced to the Public Health Officer's records.

**Long Beach City Health Officer<sup>2</sup>** - Of the 241 sewage spills, 92 (38%) originated in the Los Angeles River Watershed Area, which is tributary to the Long Beach Harbor/San Pedro Bay. Of these spills, the dischargers indicated they reported 73 (79%) spills to Long Beach City's Health Officer, although all spills may not have reached waters within the City of Long Beach. The City Health Officer reported being notified of only two (3%) spills. For the remaining 71 spills, the Health Officer stated that in 52 (73%) instances it was not notified and in 19 (27%) instances it is unknown whether notification occurred.

The City of Long Beach's Department of Health reported that, until very recently, the City did not actively document spill notification information and that its information represents the City's "best estimation" as to whether or not spills were reported to the City's Health Officer.

**Orange County Health Officer** – Of the 241 spills, 23 (9%) originated in the San Gabriel River Watershed Area, which is tributary to ocean waters in Orange County. Dischargers stated they reported 13 (57%) spills occurring in the San Gabriel River Watershed Area to the Orange County Health Officer, although all spills may not have reached waters within Orange County. The Orange County Health Officer stated that it was notified of two (15%) spills.

---

<sup>2</sup> Prior to January 2007, DPW indicated that it reported all spills discharged from its systems to the Los Angeles County Public Health Officer and not to other health officers. Since January 2007, DPW has begun reporting spills to the Long Beach City Health Officer and has had no spills to report to Orange or Ventura counties. In addition, LACSD indicated that although it reported all spills discharged from its systems to waters of the State to the Los Angeles County Public Health Officer, it did not report spills reaching the Los Angeles River and Santa Clara River Watershed Areas to the Long Beach City and Ventura County Health Officers. LACSD indicated that it now notifies these health officers of all spills that may affect waters within their jurisdiction. LACBS indicated that it notifies the County Public Health Officer of all spills from its systems and it also notifies the Long Beach City Health Officer if the spill is tributary to the Los Angeles River.

**Ventura County Health Officer<sup>3</sup>** – Of the 241 spills, five (2%) originated in the Santa Clara Watershed Area, which is tributary to ocean waters in Ventura County. Dischargers stated they reported one (20%) spill occurring in the Santa Clara Watershed Area to the Ventura County Health Officer, although all spills may not have reached waters within Ventura County. The Ventura County Health Officer stated that it recalled being notified of the one spill, but not the remaining four spills.

### **Conclusion**

The reporting of sewage spills by dischargers and the tracking of sewage spills by the health officers need to be improved. Recommendations 7, 8, 11, and 12 in our January 24, 2007 Sewage Spill Report adequately address these issues, and therefore we have no additional recommendations.

### **Additional Issue**

During our review of the spill data provided by DPW, we noted a 1.2 million gallon sewage spill that occurred in the Santa Clara Riverbed in the Santa Clara Watershed Area in June 2003. According to DPW, the riverbed was dry at the time of the spill and it did not reach State waters. However, the spill occurred within 500 feet of a residential community. DPW stated that it immediately dispatched crews to remove solids discharged into the riverbed. Although the spill was reported to the County Public Health Officer, it is unclear whether State law requires such reporting to the local health officer.

### **Recommendation**

**The Board of Supervisors instruct the Department of Public Health, in conjunction with the Public Health Commission, the Auditor-Controller, and County Counsel to determine whether new State laws are needed to ensure the protection of public health when sewage spills discharge into dry riverbeds that are near residential communities.**

Please contact me if you have any questions, or your staff may contact DeWitt Roberts at (213) 974-8423.

JTM:DR:JMS

c:     Public Health Commission  
          Chief Administrative Officer  
          Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors  
          Public Information Officer  
          County Counsel

---

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2.

Audit Committee

Director, Public Health Department

Director, Department of Public Works

General Manager, Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts

Director, Los Angeles City Bureau of Sanitation

Director, Long Beach City Department of Health and Human Services

Director, Environmental Health, Orange County

Director, Environmental Health, Ventura County

Executive Officer, Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board

Heal the Bay

Santa Monica Baykeeper